

All That He Ever Loved

Aaron J Clarke

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Cover Photo of Vikos Gorge taken by CHE on May 2, 2013.

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Author Bio

AARON J. CLARKE grew up in North Queensland, attending Bowen State High School and James Cook University, where he was awarded a BA (Hons) II A in English Literature. In 2004, Jacobyte Books published his first novella, *Epiphany of Life*. Aaron is an avid reader of nineteenth-century literature and hopes to write a French novel someday. Aaron's interests are varied and range from classical music to molecular biology. In 2004, the 'Journal of Young Investigators' published his paper on Schizophrenia, an illness from which he personally suffers.

All That He Ever Loved

All that he ever loved, all that he ever desired, was dead. For over thirty years, the memory of him filled Agapias with an all-consuming emotion, to the point where death would be a welcome reprieve. He thought of death often, for in death, he would be reunited with the beloved whose memory was decaying in the grave of forgetfulness. However, if the beloved were resurrected, then Agapias could gain the lost feeling of what it was to be in love. To achieve this, he needed the last portrait taken of the Apollonian youth before the chilly winds of death had extinguished life's flame. No matter how hard Agapias searched for the elusive image, he always floundered on the sea of amorous ambition. So, instead, he sat at his desk with a pen in hand and then closed his eyes before describing the phantom paramour.

Vasilus was a muscular youth of average height. His eyes, oh yes, one mustn't forget that prized feature, were a deep cobalt. His smooth skin was alabaster in tint, and his hair was a mass of gold, adorned with ringlets —the perfect exemplar of masculine perfection.

Yet Agapias knew no one could ever usurp Vasilus from his heart, no matter if they were a mirror image, for they could not reflect the love he bore for the deceased original. To him, they would always be an inferior copy. If only

there were a way to snatch Vasilus from Hades' clutches. A tear slid down his cheek as he realised, 'I'd sacrifice my soul to have him.' Yet Agapias knew the netherworld was a place from which no one escapes. Now and then, he feared death, but he also feared a life without Vasilus. Instead, he existed in a transitory world, neither alive nor dead; however, when the summer storms swept across the valley, interspersed with olive and cypress, he would walk in the rain, and at that moment, he felt alive. But that moment passed when the tempest dispersed, returning him to that transitory state between life and death.

In a fit of rage, he tore the paper to shreds, and in that instant, a gust of wind blew the fragments outside, where they, like the seeds of disillusionment, were scattered across the valley. Yet from those discarded shards, the past would be reborn, for the gods took pity on Agapias, who, unbeknownst to the divine intervention, wandered the poppy-covered fields, hoping to find solace in nature's glory. From the corner of his eye, he saw a ruined house whose weather-beaten walls and musky odour rekindled his memory of former times with Vasilus.

As Agapias approached the dilapidated dwelling, a wave of nostalgia washed over him, temporarily negating the pain of having outlived Vasilus. From the crumbling wall hung the long-sought-after paramour's portrait. Although the image was cracked in places, it showed Vasilus in all his glory, inviting a drawn-out sight from Agapias, who prized it from the wall.

'If only this image could resurrect him,' said Agapias with soaring sadness.

'Yes, if you believe it to be so.'

He spun around to see who said those portentous words, but to his dismay, there was no one. *Has love and lust driven me mad?* All that mattered as Agapias gazed at the picture was savouring every detail, especially Vasilus's serene eyes. Unable to look away, the smitten man was oblivious to the passage of several hours. When the cerulean sky changed to orange, Agapias's attention shifted from the picture to the hilly path leading to his home, whose shadow stretched before him in the fading light. With unwavering resolve, he kissed the treasured artifact before scurrying home in a fit of unrestrained joy, his desires momentarily satiated. Upon entering his modestly furnished home, he lit a clay lamp and hung the picture in front of his bed, where he lay, gazing intently at the image.

'Return to me, Vasilus,' said the middle-aged man as fatigue enveloped him.

As he slept, a glowing orb, a spark from the fire of Olympus, floated across the valley and entered through the window, hovering in front of the portrait before transforming into the likeness of Vasilus.

'I'm alive once more,' said the naked youth, pinching himself to be sure.

'Heed our warning, Vasilus. You must return to us before sunrise. If you refuse, you shall be punished,' said the gods, their thunderous voices echoing in his mind before dispersing into silence. In the lamp-lit room, he saw Agapias's recumbent profile on the bed, whose aged, ravaged face he did not recognise. Curiosity propelled him closer, his shadow falling on the sleeper, whose eyes snapped open.

‘Vasilus?’ The youth recoiled when Agapias reached out. ‘Don’t you remember me?’

‘No, you’re a stranger.’

‘It’s Agapias!’

‘That can’t be.’ His eyes were enflamed with bewilderment and belligerence. ‘You’re a prune.’

‘More than thirty years have passed,’ said the despondent man, whose heart was pulverised to ash by the youth’s insensitivity. Yet, hoping to reawaken love in the young man, he continued courting Vasilus, whose resistance eventually crumbled.

‘I’m hungry, Agapias,’ said he, clutching his rumbling stomach. ‘I haven’t eaten for a while.’

Leaping from the bed, the mature man retrieved a plate of food from another room and gave it to Vasilus. Masses of roast lamb disappeared into the young man’s mouth with unstoppable speed, his cheeks bulging like a squirrel’s as he hunched over the plate, afraid of losing a single morsel.

‘Do you have any wine?’ asked Vasilus, licking his fingers. ‘I forgot how good a cook you are, Agapias.’

‘No one can resist my cooking,’ said the middle-aged man, grinning from ear to ear as he handed him a clay cup.

‘That was one thing that attracted me.’

‘And what of the others?’

‘Your intelligence, kindness, but most of all, your beauty,’ said Vasilus, cradling the cup in his hand, reminiscing with fondness and regret.

‘I’m still the same person you had loved all those years ago.’

Who was he deceiving, himself or Vasilus? Time had disfigured him, turning the beautiful flower into an obnoxious weed.

‘Will you condescend to kiss me?’ asked Agapias, burning with a yearning that needed to be satisfied.

Suddenly, a rooster crowed, causing Vasilus to shake with fear. ‘I must go.’ Before dashing out the door, he said, ‘I’ll return at nightfall.’

His tear-filled eyes followed the retreating figure, and just as suddenly as Vasilus appeared, he disappeared, leaving the forlorn Agapias contemplating what to do next. Like the birds he saw flitting across the amber sky, Agapias jumped into action, preparing yet another magnificent meal to win the heart of his beloved. He was so devoted to his culinary task that day turned to night, marked by the evening star, a diamond against the darkening sky, sinking below the horizon. His heart raced with anticipation as he waited for Vasilus to enter through the door.

An hour later, still, the beloved had not appeared, causing Agapias’s confidence to crumble. ‘Had Vasilus’s previous visitation been merely a dream?’ thought the mature man, whose eyes were fixed on the door. Then, to his relief, Agapias heard approaching footsteps, followed by a knock on the wooden barrier.

It slowly opened to reveal Vasilus's beautiful features in the glow of the lamplight.

Instead of reproaching him for his tardiness, Agapias smiled and gestured for him to enter. 'You must be famished from your arduous journey.'

'You've outdone yourself, Agapias,' said Vasilus as he saw a table bedecked with platefuls of food. 'You shouldn't have...' He sank onto a stool, tearing a drumstick from the roast chicken and savouring its aroma before eating it. 'I don't wish to be an imposition.'

'You're not Vasilus.' A smile spread across his face as Agapias watched the young man stuff more food into his mouth. All that mattered to the smitten man was catering to the beloved's hunger. 'I'm glad you appreciate my efforts.'

'More than you can imagine,' said Vasilus with growing gratitude. 'Because from where I come, we do not need sustenance.'

Agapias cast his gaze downwards, fearful of betraying his shame. 'Do you recall how you ended up in Hades?'

'No.'

Agapias wrung his hands until they were red and swollen. 'Do you remember our trip to Kerkyra?'

'Having tasted the waters of Lethe, my memories now drift in a soothing, indistinct haze.' Vasilus licked his gravy-covered fingers. 'Perhaps you could enlighten me?'

Guilt-ridden, Agapias collapsed next to him. In hindsight, he probably should have remained silent, but when he met Vasilus's gaze, he felt the urge to speak the truth, regardless of the consequences. Like Theseus using a thread to navigate the Minotaur's maze, Agapias retraced his steps through time, finally reaching the sun-drenched Ionian shores.

Thirty years ago, against the Ionian backdrop of Kerkyra, Agapias's happiness was clouded by jealousy. Although it remained suppressed during the waking hours, it surfaced in his dreams. As Agapias slept, visions of Vasilus entwined with an unknown man took root, their tangled limbs like gnarled branches grasping for one another in the luminous sun. *Oh, how I despise them and myself. He'll tire of him, I'm sure of it.* A moment later, Vasilus walked to the azure waters, where an anonymous man followed, his muscular frame outlined by the sun's golden gleam. Despair grew in Agapias's heart, transforming his once loving gaze into icy reproachfulness. The sea remained constant, indifferent to his sorrow. Still, Agapias knew its tides carried the undeniable truth: time would pull them apart as inexorably as it had brought them together. Like a ruptured seed pod, Agapias was flung from the grip of the deadly

dream into the blinding glare of wakefulness. He jolted upright in bed, his sobs piercing the silence in long, shuddering bursts.

‘No, you can’t have him!’

‘Shh, Agapias.’ He caressed his cheek. ‘It’s another one of your nightmares.’ He paused, then smiled gently, hoping to alleviate Agapias’s angst. He leaned forward, planting a kiss on his lips. ‘Go back to sleep.’

Agapias pushed him away, his voice filled with accusation – a force that made Vasilus flinch from its severity. ‘Where were you?’

Avoiding his gaze, Vasilus murmured sheepishly, ‘The beach, as usual.’ He hesitated, then brushed away a tear that slid down his cheek. ‘Why this cross-examination? Don’t you trust me, Agapias?’

‘Forgive me, Vasilus.’ He cradled the moaning man. ‘Forgive my jealousy. Love makes fools of us.’

Indeed, love had made a fool of Agapias; it never occurred to him that the young man’s theatrics had deceived him. As a result, every falsehood that poured from Vasilus’s crimson lips went unchallenged. On rare occasions, he dared to dispute Vasilus’s veracity; his questions were met with yet another flood of tears. Consumed by guilt, Agapias would plead for absolution, further ensnaring himself in the web of Vasilus’s capriciousness, which became evident during their stay in Kerkyra. At dawn, for instance, Vasilus silently tiptoed out of the bedroom, hurrying down the winding path to the beach where a mysterious,

muscular figure awaited him. Hours later, Vasilus returned with flushed cheeks and a merry tune on his lips, oblivious to Agapias's watchful presence.

‘Where were you?’

‘The beach—’

‘Why didn't you wake me?’

‘Enough of your cross-examination, Agapias!’

Instead of giving in to remorse, Agapias remained resolute, determined to reveal his lover's betrayal. ‘Who is he, Vasilus?’

‘Since we arrived in Kerkyra, your nightmares have taken hold—an unsettling manifestation of your madness.’

‘Damn it, Vasilus! Just tell me who he is—I have every right to know!’

His voice cracked as Vasilus whispered, ‘There's no one, Agapias. I go to the beach seeking solitude.’ He clenched his hands tightly as if to steady the tremors unleashed by his duplicity. ‘Your obsessive love feels like a vice, squeezing the life from my body.’ He felt unyielding, unforgiving guilt as he evaded Agapias's accusing gaze. ‘If you genuinely love me, you'll let me breathe. Give me the space I need to feel free.’

‘Let me make amends by cooking your favourite dishes,’ said Agapias, his lips curling into a spiteful smirk. ‘There are mushrooms in the forest—I'll pick some while you wait here.’

As he departed the room, his thoughts spun like a chariot's wheel, caught in the perpetual cycle of love and scorn, leaving him emotionally exhausted.

However, when Agapias entered the forest, his thoughts resumed a regular rhythm —neither hateful nor amorous—soothed by the calming aroma of pine. Under the dappled light of the canopy, he saw a variety of mushrooms growing around a weather-beaten statue of Hades. Without hesitating, he walked towards the helmet-clad figure, whose bident pointed at a large, red-capped mushroom, but the sound of approaching voices caused him to hide behind the statue. From his hidden vantage point, he noticed a striking black-haired man with a muscular physique and a short, stout figure closely following behind. A moment later, they stopped ten paces from the statue.

‘Vasilus is a mattress on which many men have lain, including me,’ said the black-haired, muscular man.

‘Epicyles, is it possible that his lover, Agapias, has doubts about him?’

‘No, Hyperion,’ the muscular man replied, pausing briefly. Before his companion could interrupt, he added, ‘The young man outshines even Aristodemus as an actor in the tragedy soon to unfold—a performance destined to shatter Agapias’s faith in him.’

After Epicyles finished his disclosure, they continued walking. Once out of sight, Agapias emerged from behind the statue, his gaze lingering on the large, red-capped mushroom.

‘One bite,’ he murmured, plucking it from the moss-covered ground. ‘And Vasilus will be no more.’

His hatred poisoned Agapias's love for the young man, festering like a boil that demanded lancing. As he staggered from the forest to their lodgings, moving with the mechanical rigidity of an automaton, the happy memories of their time together crumbled like grains of sand slipping through his fingers. What remained in their place was nothing but bitterness and contempt. As Agapias entered the room, he wore a feigned smile that seemed to fool the young man. He sliced the mushroom into thin pieces, including other vegetables to mask its bitter taste, and then added everything to a pot of honey-marinated lamb. Once again, he hid his murderous intent behind a smile, lulling the victim into a false sense of security.

'Mmm, that smells delicious,' said Vasilus, wafting the aroma from the pot to his nose. 'You've outdone yourself again, Agapias.'

'How wonderful of you to think so.' He poured some of the pot's contents into a bowl. 'It'll be a dish you'll remember for the rest of your life.'

His eyes sparkled with malevolence as he watched Vasilus devour it, blissfully unaware of his impending demise. An hour later, the young man lost consciousness, surrendering to death the following day.

Memories from thirty years ago dissolved into nothingness, leaving Agapias anchored to the present. He stood with his eyes cast downward, Vasilus's censoring gaze cutting through him like a knife blade. Agapias pressed his trembling lips together, fearing another word he uttered might stoke the bonfire

of recrimination. Silence hung heavy in the lamp-lit room for a while, as if the years between past and present had merged into this singular moment. Then, it was shattered by Vasilus's blaring wail.

'You robbed me of life.' His gaze burned with a vibrant intensity that both terrified and excited Agapias. 'All because you believed Epicydes's mendacity...' Before he exited the room, Agapias grabbed him. 'Don't touch me! I must go before sunrise. Let go of me, Agapias!'

'I cannot stand to lose you.'

'That doesn't justify poisoning me,' said he, removing Agapias's hand from his. 'Because of your irrational obsession, you've forever lost me to Hades.'

He picked up a kitchen knife and pressed it against his wrist. 'Say the word, Vasilus, and I'll join you.'

'Do as you wish, for even in death, I will despise you,' he said with bitter scorn, leaving the room, never to return.

Sadness enshrouded his soul, eclipsing love's light and condemning Agapias to a deep, melancholic darkness—an abyss from which he could never escape. Regardless, he dug the blade into his wrist, unleashing a crimson cascade that spilled to the ground, coalescing into an ever-expanding pool. Despite his efforts, death could not remove him from the living world, for unbeknownst to him, the gods had cursed him with immortality, forever separating him from Vasilus.

For centuries to come, his only companion was the beloved's cracked portrait—but even that treasured keepsake crumbled to dust with time. Distraught, Agapias witnessed civilisations rise and fall, yet he clung to the vain hope that the gods would one day free him from the prison of existence. Then, on a stormy night, he saw a young man standing beside an overhanging streetlight, bathed in its orange brilliance. As he drew closer, an invisible force compelled him to stop. Flashes of lightning illuminated his blue eyes and cascading golden locks, stirring memories of his ancient lover. At that moment, Agapias's once-hardened heart softened with sentimentality, for the unknown youth embodied all he had lost—everything that reminded him of Vasilus.

‘Don't you love the rain? It has a way of making one feel truly alive.’ Agapias was struck silent by his voice—a sound that both soothed and electrified him. The unknown youth stared directly into his eyes and added in a melodious, comforting tone, ‘I've been watching you for some time. Now that we are alone, I can speak freely.’ The stranger gestured toward a park bench overlooking the swirling sea. ‘Come, sit.’ Compelled by an undercurrent of longing, Agapias willingly yielded to his demands. ‘Do you know who I am? Do you know why I've come for you?’ Though Agapias had guessed the stranger's identity, he found himself silenced once more. ‘For millennia, I have watched you from the depths of Hades,’ he said, pausing as a flicker of hesitation passed. Then, with renewed resolve, he continued, ‘Like Sisyphus, you have pushed the boulder of guilt

uphill, only for it to roll back. Yet, your unwavering determination to make amends has moved both me and the gods.'

'Is all forgiven?' asked Agapias, his eyes brimming with tears.

Without a word, Vasilus kissed him, and the storm of life, like the one before them, calmed, revealing the starry sky. Then, shedding their mortal forms, they became incorporeal beings and entered the Elysian Fields.

The End